

MASTER SURGEONS OF AMERICA

MARCUS WHITMAN

STEPHEN B. L. PENROSE, WALLA WALLA, WASHINGTON

THE first surgical operation performed by an American physician west of the Rocky Mountains was performed by a young doctor from New York state, Marcus Whitman, M.D., in the latter part of August, 1835. The place was the annual rendezvous of fur traders and Indians on Green River, Wyoming, and the patient was the famous scout, Captain Jim Bridger. The surgeon removed an iron arrow head, three inches long, from the patient's back where it had been embedded for three years. The arrow head was crooked at the point and a cartilaginous substance had grown around it, rendering the operation difficult for that day and place, but it was completely successful and the reputation of the physician was established. Similar operations were followed by an urgent demand for his medical and surgical services, while his kindness and firm, upright character won for him for the rest of his life the title "The Good Doctor." Dr. Whitman was a man of remarkable physique, about five feet ten inches high, deep chested, and with a large head set close upon broad shoulders. His endurance and physical strength were remarkable. He had the body and the mind of the explorer, the adventurer, and the scientist.

The young surgeon, thirty-three years of age, had crossed the continent with a companion, Rev. Samuel Parker of Middlefield, Massachusetts, to explore the Pacific Northwest as representatives of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and to report to the Board concerning the feasibility of establishing a mission among the Indians. Romantic rumor had reached the East a year or two earlier that the Indians of Oregon Territory were asking for the gospel, and the result was the sending of this investigating committee, consisting of a doctor and a minister, to determine the question.

The number of Indians at the rendezvous in 1835 was so great and the information derived from them and from the trappers was so impressive that Dr. Whitman returned East for reinforcements to establish at once a mission among the Indians. The following summer he returned to Oregon with his bride, Narcissa Prentiss Whitman, Rev. Henry Harmon Spalding and his bride, and a young man, William H. Gray, who came as general factotum, and was later to become the first historian of Oregon.

Dr. Whitman and his wife were both of New England stock, their ancestors having settled in Massachusetts from England before 1635. They were well

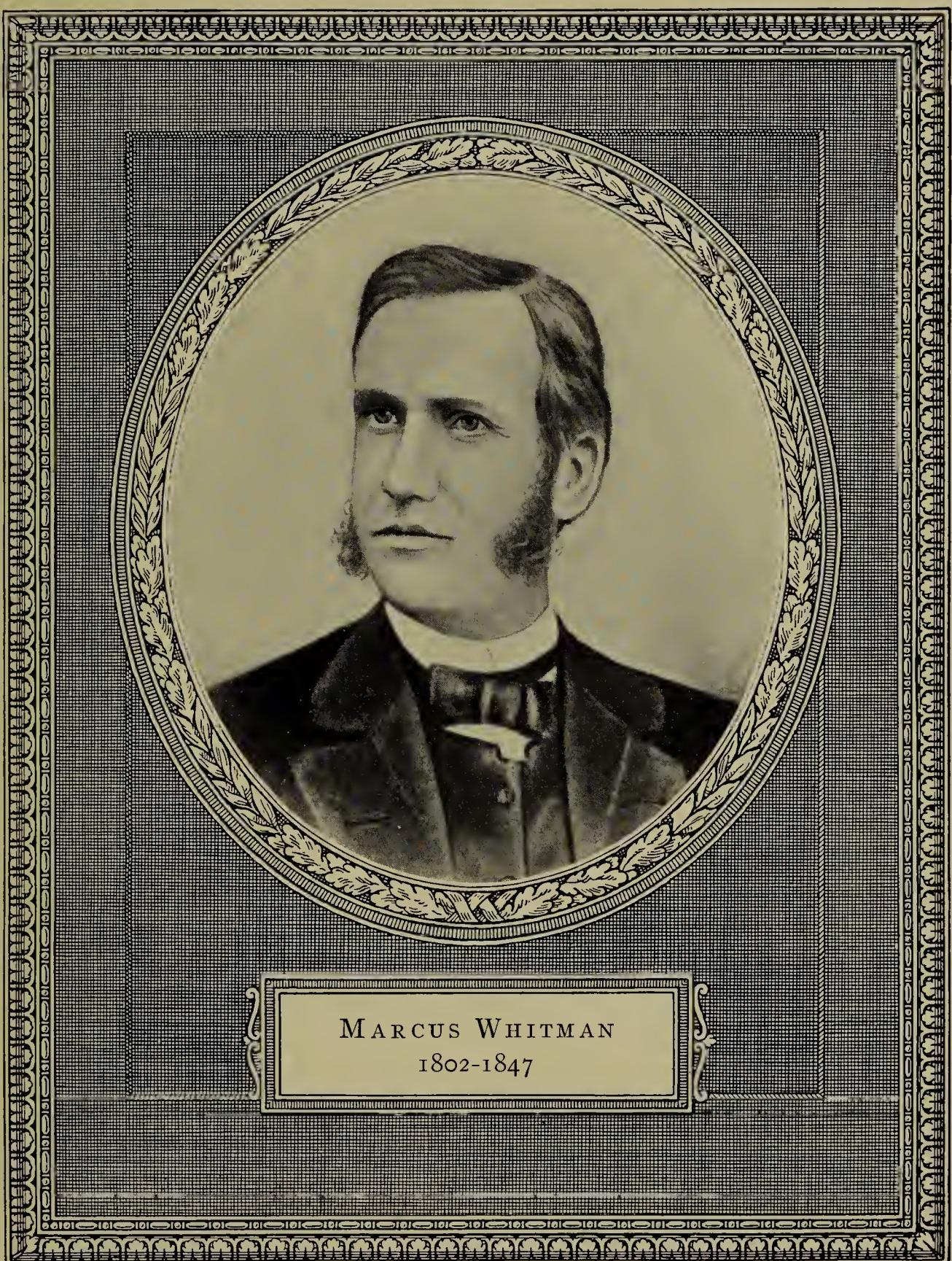
educated for their day, and came from comfortable homes of godly and hard working parents who lived thriftily on the frontier of western New York. Dr. Whitman had been educated at Plainfield, Massachusetts, where he studied Latin under Rev. Moses Hallock. Then his family moved to Rushville, New York, and he studied medicine under Dr. Ira Bryant of that place. He had received his diploma at Fairfield in 1824, and had practiced medicine for four years in Canada and afterward in western New York. He had also gained a valuable business experience by a partnership with his brother in the management of a saw mill near Potter Center. His active mind, physical vigor, and adventurous disposition had made him eager for a larger field, and he had offered himself to the American Board "as physician, teacher, or agriculturist."

Mrs. Whitman was twenty-eight years of age, tall and noble looking, with golden hair, a gracious manner, and a lovely voice. An experienced teacher, she gave herself, heart and soul, to her husband's work. Her coming and that of Mrs. Spalding marked the true beginning of American civilization on the Pacific Coast. Until woman comes the home is lacking.

Dr. and Mrs. Whitman settled at Waiilatpu, six miles west of the present town of Walla Walla, Washington, and began their life work for the Indians. The doctor installed his bride in a log cabin made from trees which he cut in the Blue Mountains, twenty miles away. The floor was hard trodden clay, and across the openings in the rough walls skins and blankets were hung to keep out the cold night air and the prowling savage. Here Mrs. Whitman established the first American home on the Pacific Coast, and here, on March 14, 1837, the first white child of American parents was born, Alice Clarissa Whitman.

When an American traveler, T. J. Farnum, visited the Whitman mission in 1839, he found that the young doctor and his wife had accomplished great things in a short time. In his diary for September 23 he wrote: "The old mission house stands on the northwest bank of the river, about four rods from the water side, at the southeast corner of an enclosure containing about two hundred and fifty acres, two hundred of which are under good cultivation. The products are wheat, Indian corn, beans, pumpkins, Irish potatoes, etc., in the fields; and beets, carrots, onions, turnips, rutabagas, water, musk and nutmeg melons, squashes, asparagus, tomatoes, cucumbers, peas, etc., in the garden—all of good quality and abundant crops." A large mission house, 100 feet by 40 feet, for the use of travelers and future immigrants, was in process of construction. A grist mill, the first in the Inland Empire, was in operation.

During these years of active work as pioneer and farmer, Dr. Whitman had learned the Indian language, had helped his wife with her teaching of the Indian boys and girls who crowded to the first school east of the Cascade Mountains, had ministered to the physical and spiritual needs of the Indians, and had acted as physician and surgeon for distant regions, going when needed to the



MARCUS WHITMAN
1802-1847

mission of Mr. and Mrs. Spalding at Lapwai, 120 miles to the east; to Tshimakain, 150 miles to the north, where, in 1838, a new mission of the American Board had been begun by Rev. Cushing Eells, Rev. Elkanah Walker, and their wives; and even down to Vancouver, 300 miles westward, where the great post of the Hudson's Bay Fur Company was located. It was a record of service rarely equaled in the missionary annals of the world.

But Dr. Whitman was fated to play a more important part than that of pioneer physician and surgeon in the Pacific Northwest. In those days the ownership of the Northwest was in doubt. The land was held under a treaty of joint occupancy between England and the United States, with the understanding that eventually the country which had the greater number of settlers in the field would become its owner. But the people of the United States were ignorant of its value, while the British Hudson's Bay Company was actively at work, deriving a rich annual revenue from trade with the Indians. Dr. Whitman learned the fertility of the soil, the vastness of the river system, the extent of its forests, and its mineral resources. He became profoundly convinced of the value of the country to the United States.

In September, 1842, a little party of travelers from the East brought word that a new treaty was about to be negotiated between England and the United States, which, it was believed, would settle the Northwest boundary line. In the absence of reliable information concerning the value of the country it was likely that the United States would amiably allow Great Britain what she desired in the Northwest, in return for concessions elsewhere. Dr. Whitman resolved to inform his government concerning the great value of the land of his adoption. To the remonstrances of his fellow-missionaries he said, "Gentlemen, though I am a missionary I am not expatriated. To Washington I will go."

On October 3, 1842, he started to cross the continent with one white companion Lovejoy, who had just brought from the East the news of the impending treaty. Dr. Whitman had other business than interviewing the government at Washington, for his fellow-missionaries had entrusted him with important correspondence addressed to the American Board at Boston, but his primary object was political, and he went first to Washington by the most expeditious route.

His winter ride from Walla Walla to Washington was full of romantic and terrible adventures. It has been called "the greatest ride in history." Blocked by Indians on the warpath, and snows in the northern mountains, he turned south through Utah and made his way to Bent's Fort on the Arkansas River. Thence he hastened to Washington, his face and hands and feet frozen by exposure. Lovejoy remained in the Mississippi Valley to arouse interest in Oregon and urge people to join the wagon train which, it was hoped, would cross the continent that summer.

Dr. Whitman reached Washington on the third of March, 1843, and Congress adjourned the next day. He could make no impression on Daniel Webster, then Secretary of State, but was more successful with President Tyler. He obtained from the latter virtual agreement that no settlement of the Northwest boundary line would be made until the chance had been given to demonstrate that Oregon could be reached by wagons, and hence was accessible for settlement by the United States. Seven years before Dr. Whitman had taken across the mountains the first wagon to the Pacific Northwest.

Horace Greeley wrote in the *New York Tribune* about Dr. Whitman as he hurried from Washington, through New York, to Boston. He transacted his business with the American Board and reported that he was received coolly for abandoning his post. Then he turned westward and, after a brief visit in western New York state to see his family and the family of Mrs. Whitman, he overtook the wagon train which had already started from the Missouri River, and was speedily elected its guide. Two hundred wagons, eight hundred or more American settlers, and two thousand horses and oxen composed the great wagon train of '43 which moved slowly westward across the prairies, through the Rocky Mountains, past the post of the protesting Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Hall, over the Blue Mountains to Waiilatpu, and down to the Willamette Valley. That wagon train blazed a trail so broad and clear across the continent that at once settlers poured westward in an unending stream. Soon the Americans vastly outnumbered the English and when by treaty, June 17, 1846, the Northwest boundary line was settled, it was drawn at the 49th parallel, instead of the mouth of the Columbia, or perhaps even the 42nd parallel, the northern boundary of California. A vast region of immense natural resources had been saved to the United States by the wagon train of '43 and by the doctor who rode at its head, who had been prophet enough to foresee the value of the country and hero enough to risk his life to save it. Has any member of the medical profession rendered a greater service to his country?

After the great wagon train had left the mission station at Waiilatpu, where it had rested and supplied itself with provisions, it traveled down the Columbia and out of the life of Dr. and Mrs. Whitman. This faithful couple, true to their original intention, settled down as missionaries to the Indians, striving to do what they could for them intellectually, physically and morally. They quietly took up again their missionary work, healing the sick, teaching the young, advising and inspiring the tribes.

But it was evident that the coming of so great a tide of white settlers would disturb and terrify the Indians. They felt that they would be driven from their homes and they blamed Dr. Whitman for his part in hastening the tide. The signing of the treaty and occupation of the country by the United States meant practically the signing of the death warrant of Dr. Whitman and his wife.

Measles broke out among the Indians near the mission in the fall of 1847. Dr. Whitman treated the patients among the Indians and among the visiting white immigrants with the same remedies, but many of the Indian patients died. Taking his remedies, they followed also the Indian custom of a sweat bath. In a low lodge of closely woven boughs by the bank of the river, water was poured on heated stones to make steam in which the sick were laid; emerging at last, dripping with sweat, they leaped into the ice cold stream. When many of them died under this treatment it was whispered that Dr. Whitman had poisoned them. An Indian custom dictated revenge.

On November 29, the discontent and hate which had gathered like a storm suddenly broke. Dr. and Mrs. Whitman were killed and scalped. All the boys and men in the mission were also killed, while the women and children, some forty in number, were held by the Indians for their own purposes and for ransom. In the lust for blood and destruction the mission buildings were burned down, the orchard was hacked to pieces, and scarcely a vestige left of the mission station in which the good doctor and his wife had spent their lives for those who slew them.

The closing scene in the life of Dr. Whitman saw him in the rôle of physician ministering to the sick. Three Indians, wrapped in blankets, had come to the door of the mission and asked for medicine. As he bent over his medicine chest to select the proper remedy for the sick Indian, one of the others slipped behind him and, raising his tomahawk, struck a glancing blow on the back of his head. The doctor leaped for the throat of the other Indian but as he struggled the deadly tomahawk rose and fell, striking the doctor on the top of the head, penetrating the skull, a fatal wound. He died as the physician would like to die, in the act of service. Of him too, it might be said that "he came, not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."

The one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Whitman mission and the beginning of American civilization on the Pacific Coast will be celebrated in 1936 by the people of Walla Walla and the state of Washington in co-operation with Whitman College, his living memorial.

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